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Workshop Report: Social Media and Islamic Practice in Southeast Asia, 14-15 April 2016, Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences

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Above the rooftops of Vienna's old city center and on the top floor of the building of one of the world's leading technology companies, a selected number of international scholars working on new media and religion in Indonesia gathered early this year to discuss their current research.¹ They were invited by the Austrian Science Fund (*Fonds zur Förderung der wissenschaftlichen Forschung*, or FWF) project "Islamic (Inter)Faces of the Internet: Emerging Socialities and Forms of Piety in Indonesia" led by Martin Slama, a researcher at the Institute for Social Anthropology at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. The workshop, which was comprised of 12 presentations in the span of two days, focused on social media and digital technologies uses and Islamic practices of Muslims in different parts of Southeast Asia. The central question that informed this workshop was how the rising use of new communication technologies affects Islamic practices and forms of piety in the Muslim majority countries of Southeast Asia. The presentations touched upon a number of related issues including Islamic finances, fashion, music, and youth culture. They discussed changes in the perception and representation of religious authority or the revival of Islamic concepts in the light of social media uses. Apart from popular Islamic expressions of piety, some presenters addressed issues of religious sectarianism and sentiments of hate spread through the online presence of particular religious groups.

What remained uncontested throughout those two days was the fact that social media have become an indispensable part of the daily practices and socialities of Muslims throughout Southeast Asia (Barendregt, 2012; Slama, 2016). For example, followers connect to their Islamic leader, be it the local preacher or the country's most influential Sufi scholar, by simply opening Facebook. Islamic leaders, on their part, use social media as means of self-representation in yet unprecedented ways. These online presences trigger new perceptions and articulations of authority and preacher-followers relationships which do not remain uncontested. This is the case when, for example, self-representations on

1 Next to the workshop organizers, Martin Slama and Dayana Lengauer, invited guests who presented their work were Bart Barendregt (Leiden University), Carla Jones (University of Colorado Boulder), Daromir Rudnykyj (University of Victoria), Eva Nisa (Victoria University of Wellington), Fatimah Husein (State Islamic University Yogyakarta), Ismail Fajrie Alatas (University of Michigan), John Postill (RMIT University), Merlyna Lim (Carleton University), Saskia Schäfer (Columbia University), and Wahyuddin Halim (State Islamic University Makassar).

the Internet intersect with the Islamic concept of *riya*, roughly translated as “showing off”. Yet, social media and other online platforms, such as forums or blogs, offer ample space for users to discuss and eventually find agreement upon such activities. This is only one example of how ‘new’ media prompt the renegotiation of traditional practices, forms of communication, and self-representation (Gershon, 2010).

The infusion of digital media in everyday expressions of Islamic piety affect not only the construction of Islamic authority but also popular understandings of Islamic gender roles. Selfies, popular among social media users across Southeast Asia, expose those behind the camera to exhibitionist narratives and other forms of criticism framed in the discourse of Muslim femininity and virtue. Notably, both the authors of contested visual expressions and their most vigorous critics are predominantly young social media users. As a number of presenters argued, social media use affects the ways in which Southeast Asian Muslims understand their religion and conversely, Muslims’ understandings of their religion affect the ways they use social media to spread their message, as in the case of online *da’wa*, or Islamic proselytization.

Another aspect of social and digital media, which is rarely touched upon, is the effect of sound or music both upon consumers and music production industries. For example, *nasyid* – a popular music genre among Southeast Asian Muslims today – reconciles piety with modern consumerist lifestyles by offering new avenues for the expression and experience of Islam. Islamic sounds, constitutive of short videos posted on social media and other online platforms, trigger affective registers among users and generate sentiments and dispositions which further inform online and offline socialities. Social media offer sites where one can literally pour out one’s heart. This stands in stark opposition to widespread anxieties that the digital could take the intimacy out of social relationships (Baym, 2010). On the contrary, social media are often used to sustain close (group) relationships beyond the limitations of physical co-presence.

Apart from sentiments that nurture group cohesion, social media can become the site where anxieties with regard to social, political, and economic disparities become projected. Such anxieties become tangible in the online (as well as offline) debates over debt and in the Malaysian state’s efforts to reformulate Islamic finance around ideas of equity and equal sharing. Similarly, in Indonesia, social thresholds become imprinted in online sectarian narratives, often reinforced by violent rhetorics. As it became clear during the workshop, social and political activism in Southeast Asia today runs across the boundaries of online and offline presence and along emerging socialities. Social media can function not only to support cross-sectarian social bonds but also to demonstrate and nurture suspicion between different religious fractions. In the face of the plurality of lifestyles and voices visible in social media today, presenters also discussed various endeavors of state and non-state actors to control the online activities of Internet users as well as the implications of such attempts for processes of democratization.

The rather close and familiar setting of the workshop provided ample room for the discussion of ongoing research and the theorizing of preliminary findings. Many participants, including myself, profited from the presentations of research tackling related questions and addressing similar challenges in the study of Islamic practices and socialities in the context of social media and new technologies. The workshop

simultaneously provided opportunities for rigorous exchange for both presenters and external participants. The topic of the workshop received a wide coverage by Austrian media, which signals rising public interest in Islamic practices in the digital age. Additional information on the workshop is provided on the Austrian Academy of Sciences website reporting on local events.² With its particular constellation and well-chosen venue, the workshop was certainly perceived as an exceptional scholarly event.



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² Austrian Academy of Sciences' events, retrieved from <http://www.oeaw.ac.at/en/events-communication/events/eventdetail/article/social-media-religioese-praxis-in-indonesien/>

